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ABSTRACT

Stress has become a problem to educational administrators who often report a high level of stress. This study explored the perceived stress levels of Kentucky elementary school principals. Questionnaires mailed to 200 elementary school principals produced 115 usable returns, a 57.5 percent response rate. The questionnaire consisted of a 24-item forced-choice event survey using a Likert scale. Findings indicate that the most stressful events involved forcing the resignation or dismissal of a teacher and dealing with unsatisfactory performance of professional staff. The lowest amount of stress was associated with working with the district central administration. The two most stressful events correlated significantly with the variables, such as gender, age, and number of years as a principal. A conclusion is that although Kentucky elementary principals experience some stress, the job overall is not highly stressful. (13 references) (LMI)

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STRESS INDICATORS OF KENTUCKY ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

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A paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the **Mid-South Educational Research Association** in New Orleans, LA, November 14-16, 1990.

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STRESS INDICATORS OF KENTUCKY ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

ABSTRACT

Stress has become a problem to educational administrators who often report a high level of stress. The objective of this research was to ascertain the perceived stress level of Kentucky elementary school principals. A questionnaire was developed by the researchers to obtain the information and was administered to a random sample of 200 elementary principals. Of the sample, 115 or 57.5 percent responded.

The questionnaire consisted of a 24 item forced-choice event survey using a Likert scale. Of the respondents, *forcing the resignation or dismissal of a teacher*, had the highest rating--4.26 on a five point scale. The second most stressful event to respondents was *dealing with unsatisfactory performance of professional staff* with a rating of 3.96. The lowest rating was *working with school district central administration* at 1.83. Only two events, *forcing the resignation or dismissal of a teacher* and *dealing with unsatisfactory performance of professional staff* correlated significantly with variable of gender, age, and number of years as a principal.

INTRODUCTION

Stress has become a problem to people of all walks of life. Stress affects the actions of the individual on a professional and a personal level. The physical, mental, and emotional well-being of each individual is influenced by the amount of stress he/she perceives in a given situation. Stress, therefore, is a somewhat subjective concept, depending on how each person perceives the situation encountered. However subjective stress may be, it would be difficult to find a person who would say he/she had never experienced stress.

Stress has become a household word, but what is it? How does it affect principals? How can principals recognize stress in their life? Stress has many meanings, but most people think of stress as the demands of life. Technically, these demands are called "stressors," and the actual wear and tear on the body is the stress. Brimm stated that "stress may be viewed as any action or situation that places physical or psychological demands on people" (p. 29). The demands or challenges of life can come from people and events around the principal, as well as from their inner thoughts and struggles. When these demands increase, principals often feel that they are under excessive stress. Although stress is typically viewed in a negative manner, it must be recognized that a certain amount of stress is necessary for principals to achieve and perform to their highest abilities. Principals would be bored if they were forced to spend their days sitting in an easy chair. However, they also do not want to live in an overly

stressful world, but need ways to live with stressful situations and find enjoyment in meeting and mastering the challenges of their rapidly changing world. Negative stress, or distress, is felt when a principal perceives the demands as being beyond his or her coping abilities. Brimm (1982) noted that "feelings of insecurity, helplessness, or desperation are associated with negative stress" (p. 30).

Stress is a necessary and unavoidable concomitant of daily living--necessary because without some stress principals would be listless and apathetic creatures, and unavoidable because it relates to any external event, be it pleasurable or anxiety-producing. Anxiety leads to tension, a physical reaction often exhibited in nervous impulses which cause changes in the body. When tension reaches a degree of intensity that has an adverse effect on the body, the result is stress. Stress can cause a wide variety of physical problems , often debilitating and frequently damaging to work performance. Severe stress has been correlated with coronary disease, respiratory problems, backaches, high blood pressure, and other psychosomatic illnesses, to the extent that for most people stress is a loaded term that connotes unhealthy or harmful conditions, i.e., a disease or illness. Since each individual perceives situations and demands from their own point of view and is constantly being influenced by a variety of factors, any measure of stress-causing indicators is dependent on the individual's perception of his/her coping mechanisms at that time. In truth, however, stress can also motivate and

invigorate and enable people to achieve far more than they thought themselves capable of doing. In general, most stressors are in themselves neutral and do not necessarily produce distressful reactions. Adverse physical and emotional consequences are usually the result of the way an individual perceives particular events or conditions.

EDUCATORS

In the field of education, teachers and administrators often report a high level of stress, sometimes referred to as burnout. Burnout is a distinctive kind of job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted. Research indicates that individuals engaged in the helping professions or human services are particularly susceptible to burnout. Burnout is not just a temporary indisposition, but an unhealthy condition that makes once idealistic, productive, enthusiastic principals detriments to their profession, their colleagues, their faculties, their students, and themselves. Strangely enough, burnout usually affects the most able principals--those who are the most competent and committed, those who feel the most strongly about the value of what they do and want to do their best. School districts are now paying increased attention to burnout because it diminishes the effective services of the very best people in the principalship.

The stressful situations faced by educators are as varied as the individual. According to research there are two sources of stress, one self-imposed and the other situational. Self-imposed stress comes not from overwork but from unrealistic expectations. Situational stress results from the demands of others, the conflict among people, the clash of values. However, educators are encountering more problems today than ever before. For example, they must deal with student apathy, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, high dropout rates, educational reforms, itinerant students, and dysfunctional families, to name but a few. Coping with the problems of students in addition to one's own problems may be a burden too heavy to bear. Add to these problems the everyday responsibilities of educating students and providing a well-run learning environment, and it becomes obvious that educators have to be capable of coping with a great deal of stress.

Much has been written about teacher stress, but very little research has been done on stress perceived by the elementary principal. Elementary principals have a myriad of responsibilities. They not only manage the school and take care of discipline problems, but they are also the instructional leaders of their schools. By the very nature of their jobs, principals have to deal with many stressful situations. In a study conducted by Griesen and Richards (1984) the

> "factors contributing most to overall work stress for principals were the following: (1) work load; (2) dealing with staff problems; (3)

maintaining staff support; (4) central office support; and (5) dealing with student problems" (p. 30).

In research done by Brimm (1982), middle school principals ranked the ten most stressful administrative tasks as follows:

1. Complying with state, federal and organizational rules and policies.
2. Trying to resolve parent/school conflicts.
3. Having to make decisions that affect the lives of individual people that I know.
4. Evaluating staff members' performance.
5. Feeling that the progress on my job is not what is should or could be.
6. Feeling that I have too heavy a work load, one that I cannot possibly finish during the normal work day.
7. Trying to gain public approval and/or financial support for school programs.
8. Handling student discipline problems.
9. Feeling that I have to participate in school activities outside the normal working hours at the expense of my personal time.
10. Imposing excessively high expectations on myself. (p. 35)

In a study of Canadian elementary school principals, McMurray (1984) found the following:

> Only two "events," namely too many meetings and insufficient time for planning and preparation were marked as high stress producers by the majority. Six other "events," namely paper work, special-needs students, incompetent administrators, lack of administrative support, staff conflicts, and unmotivated students were reported by more than 20% of the principals as areas of highest stress. (p. 4)

Studies have shown that principals consistently name the same situations as stress producing. However, Jones (1983) found in his study of principals' perceptions of stress that "principals do not perceive that they experience high levels of stress on the job for extended periods of time" (p. 25). This finding corresponds with those of Hiebert and Mendaglio (1988) and Wiggins (1983) that most principals do not find their jobs to be highly stressful. Jones (1983) hypothesized that

> one explanation for these findings is that public school principals are trained to meet the demands of the job, thus creating a slight imbalance between the perceived demands and perceived ability to respond to stress-producing events. (p.25)

The time of year that stress investigations are conducted may also influence the responses given since stress levels seem to vary at different times of the school year.

METHODOLOGY

Since measuring the amount of stress felt in a given situation would be reported in subjective terms and varies greatly from person to person, an instrument had to be designed to measure stressful situations in a uniform way. The Kentucky Elementary Principal's Questionnaire on Stress Indicators (KEPQSI) was designed to meet this need. Section one of the KEPQSI collected demographic data about each respondent which might show some correlation to stress. This information included age, gender, race, and marital status. Also included were questions about the number of years in education, the number of hours worked per week, and the size of the school in which the respondent worked.

Section two of the KEPQSI listed twenty four stressful events that elementary principals are likely to encounter. Respondents were asked to rate each situation on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, with a 1 being not stressful and 5 being extremely stressful. The stress events were taken from the Koff, Laffey, Olson and Cichon's table of stress ratings on administrative events.

The KEPQSI was sent to a random sample of 200 elementary principals, 115 responded for a 57.5 % response rate. The SPSS statistical program was used to analyze the data received.

FINDINGS

The mean age of the respondents was 47 years, with 56.5% between the ages of 40 and 50. Of the respondents, 67.8% were male and 31.3% were female. The majority of the respondents, 84.3% were married, with 7% single and 7.8% divorced. The vast majority of the respondents 98.3% were Caucasian with only 1.7% African American.

Respondents having 21-29 years experience as a principal totaled 9.6%; those with 16-20 years experience was 13%; those with 11-15 years experience was 20%; those with 6-10 years experience was 30.4%; and, those with 1-5 years experience was 27%. The mean was ten years experience as a principal. Respondents having 21-28 years experience as a teacher totaled 4.3%; those with 16-20 years experience as a teacher was 16.5%; those with 11-15 years experience as a teacher was 25.2%; those with 6-10 years experience as a teacher was 33.9%; and, those with 1-5 years experience as a teacher was 19.1%. The mean was 11 years experience as a teacher. The respondents also indicated that 64.3% plan to retire in the next five years.

The total number of students in the respondents' school ranged from 68 to 1,565 with the mean being 456 students. The number of staff in the respondent's school (both professional and nonprofessional) ranged from 7 to 121 with the mean being 41 staff members. The number of hours worked per week by the respondents was as follows: 6% indicated working 61-75 hours per week; 31.3%

worked 51-60 hours per week; 31.3% worked 46-50 hours per week; 20.9% worked 41-45 hours per week; with the mean being 51.4 hours worked per week.

In Table I, the 24 stressful events are listed with the mean scores. *Forcing the resignation or dismissal of a teacher* had the highest rating of 4.26 on a 1 to 5 scale. *Dealing with unsatisfactory performance of professional staff* was the second highest event with a rating of 3.96. The third highest stressful event was *legal action against you or your school* with a rating of 3.90. Fourth, rated at 3.74 was *involuntary transfer to another principalship*. The lowest stress rating at 1.83 was *working with school district central administration*. Next to lowest was *implementing Board of Education curriculum policies* at 1.92.

The data were analyzed by SPSS for possible correlations between the demographic variables and the stressful events encountered. Events 12 and 13, namely *forcing the resignation or dismissal of a teacher*, and *dealing with unsatisfactory performance of professional staff* were significant beyond the .5 level using chi-square analysis. The two events were significant at the .5 level for gender, age, and number of years as principal. Males reported events 12 and 13 as being significantly stressful, while females reported no significant difference in the stressfulness of any of the given events. The age of the principal and the number of years worked as a principal were also significant. The data indicate that the significant correlations between demographic data and stressful events

were limited. The number of hours worked per week was not significant where compared to any of the stressful events.

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected from this brief study lead to several conclusions. Kentucky's elementary principals were, generally speaking, under some stress. While several of the principals ranked some events as not stressful, the mean ranking for the lowest stress-producing event was 1.83. Of the 24 stressful events, 11 had mean scores closest to the slightly stressful level and 9 had mean scores closest to the stressful ranking. Only four events were ranked closest to the very stressful level. None of the events had a mean score closest to the extremely stressful level. From this, it was concluded that the Kentucky elementary principal does not have a high stress job. This corresponds with the findings of other research studies conducted on administrator stress.

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